Intellectual Traditions in Islam

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The Rational Tradition in Islam

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1. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The rational tradition in Islam can be studied and looked at in various ways. The main danger is not to expand the tradition so much that it would cover almost everything in Islamic history and culture, because whenever Muslims engaged in thought and whatever direction their thinking may have taken, they had to use reason, and by doing so they became, whether they wished it or not, part of the rational tradition, broadly considered. This is true not only of scientists and philosophers but certainly of many of the theological schools and the mystics too, because whenever they tried to express themselves or communicate their experience, they had to use reason and therefore connect somehow with the rational tradition.

In this very general sense, the rational tradition would cover almost any statement that is made by any Muslim at any time. In its most narrow sense, but perhaps not for us the most interesting sense, it would cover the so-called positive sciences which would be concerned purely with rational things and connections. Anyone who wants to study this field can easily look up the histories

of science and follow the research of the historians of science. The most interesting part of the rational tradition for us is where it comes directly in contact with, and tries to understand, the whole question of religion, the origins and structure of the religious community, where it stands today and what one can do about its organization. This normally takes the form of political philosophy, but that is only one part, perhaps the most interesting part, of the way in which the rational tradition tries to understand and deal with the phenomenon of religion and the religious community.

It is in this particular sense that one can say that the rational tradition is Islamic – otherwise one can ask what is so different about this tradition? It is possible to study mathematics anywhere, there is nothing Islamic about the venture. But this tradition also has something to do with religious tradition and a religious community like Islam. It is not only encouraged by the religious community – which can encourage or discourage all kinds of things – but it sees problems in the presence of reason in the community and tries to harmonize the relationship between reason and the so-called revelation. It sees conflicts and tries to mitigate them; it finds mysterious things in religion and tries to understand them or give a rational account of their possibility at least, if not a full explanation of religious dogmas or doctrines; and if it has a political or social dimension, it tries rationally to talk about and communicate certain ideas about how the community should be organized.

If we are not simply historians but live in the present and are trying to become conscious of the ways in which our minds work as we think about the rational tradition in Islam, it is important for us to remember that we hardly ever look at the Islamic tradition without any intermediary notions. Usually we begin with certain common notions that we hold about rationalism and what rational thought is, and whether we like it or not these happen to be modern European notions. That is the culture that we start with, because we study it in schools, and it is through the notions of this culture that we begin to think about the world, so to speak.

What is the most important 'cultural baggage' that we bring to our understanding of the rational tradition in Islam? It is undoubtedly what is normally called rationalism. If we read about

rationalism in the current literature, even literature that impinges on Ismaili studies – let us say, through the works of the late scholar Henry Corbin (1903–1978), we find a general trend against rationalism. There is, indeed, an aspect of rationalism which is very strange and negative. I suppose it is a trend of thought which denies the very existence or importance of values, of anything that is not mathematical or physical more or less and is not part of positive science. It is opposed to all religions and religious institutions, all religious beliefs and dogmas. That is one extreme form of rationalism. The other extreme is expressed when people talk about fundamentalism, by which they mean that it is not rational. This is a sense of rationalism that is the exact opposite, which says that the most angelic good that a human being can have is to be rational about his ideas, his institutions, traditions and way of life, rather than blindly following whatever dogmas one has.

This conflict about rationalism and the notion of rationalism became central to European culture and history in the 17th and 18th centuries, during a period which is called the age of rationalism, the age of Enlightenment. It is almost useless to talk about the rational tradition in Islam without having some very basic notions of what it was, in the Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries, that was taken to be rationalism in the good and the bad sense. What were its salient features? That tradition began late in the 17th century through a dictionary – it was the age of dictionaries and encyclopaedias – by a man named Pierre Bayle (d. 1706) who called his work *A Critical and Historical Dictionary*. This dictionary was critical in the sense of being destructive, not constructive. It was an attempt to 'clean' religious traditions and dogmas of what they used to call prejudices that have surrounded the history of religions. The dictionary was not a rational attempt to justify religious beliefs. Rationalism is sometimes also understood in this positive sense, as for example when we say: 'He rationalizes, he is trying to give a rational account of something religious.' That is a constructive form of rationalism, an attempt to understand, to justify, to give reasons for something. But in the case of Bayle – as well as the famous *Encyclopaedia* in which the rationalism of the 18th century was embodied and to which the major thinkers of the time such as Diderot, Voltaire and others

contributed – it was a destructive kind of rationalism. It was an attempt to show much of religion and religious ideas to be merely prejudices and without foundations.

These rationalists were not simply against the idea of religion. There was also the idea of what to do about the religious society that existed then. We should remember that we are in France, not in England where toleration had already been a tradition for a long time. France, where this rational tradition developed, was a country that was still strongly religious, monarchic and absolutist; in fact, it was a model of the absolutist monarchic tradition. The French had just emerged from a long period of religious wars between the Catholics and the Protestants, and the Catholic Church was one of the mainstays of the monarchy in France. The question of the rationalists was what to do with their society which was strongly religious. Then they developed the strange notion of the 'republic of letters' ruled by the 'men of letters'. In short, by a few 'enlightened' people, who are supposed to use the law of reason and are equal among themselves, would rule society and spread their notions against religion in society as a whole. These people were to be the new 'priesthood', if we can think of that as an analogy; they would design what was good and what was true, what was bad and what was false; they were the ones who were to judge and condemn the obscurantist prejudices of society. We see how easily this situation can lead to the substitution of one public dogma for another, of a new dogmatism for another. Those who know anything about the French Revolution know how fanatical and intolerant a society can become to religion when it begins to believe in such notions.

Next, they entertained strange notion of public opinion. Religion, as far as the multitude is concerned, is obviously a collection of beliefs and opinions. But unlike in England where public opinion had a very positive sense and could be built upon, developed and improved, among the rationalists in France at that time public opinion was simply rejected. In short, public opinion had to be totally replaced. It was not understood as semi-enlightened and in need of clarification, but as utterly blind and in need of a new enlightenment. New ideas had to be substituted for the old ones by these 'men of letters', the enlightened few who were supposed to become the new rulers. They were to form the opinions of the

public. In reality, they became, analogically, just as militant as the religiously militant people anywhere on the globe in their vocabulary and their methods. A few rationalists even thought of themselves as capable of changing the community in general as Christ and his apostles, few as they were, had meant to do.

There is a famous letter written by Voltaire in 1760 to de Lambert, one of the leading contributors to the French *Encyclopaedia*, which is blasphemous because it basically compares the philosophers, *les philosophes* as they called them in French, to the apostles of Christ. 'Would it not be possible,' he asked, 'for half a dozen enlightened people to succeed in changing society the way a dozen disciples of Christ did it before?' This is an important social aspect of the rationalist movement in Europe. Think of Marxism, for instance, how it started and what it was. Again two or three people had the intention of changing society completely. Their notion was to subject everything to the order of reason and not to let prejudices rule humanity any more. Their vision of man was purely naturalist, concerned only with this world. The rationalists, as such, had no notion that one might think about the world to come, and the political dimension soon became revolutionary in terms of society. The French Encyclopaedists such as Voltaire and Diderot were not political revolutionaries in the sense that they were happy with a kind of limited monarchy, but it did not take long for some real revolutionaries to surface and claim that they would destroy all the churches, get rid of the Catholic Church and establish a society on the basis of reason and solely of reason.

Finally, one of the more interesting aspects of the French Encyclopaedists and the rationalists was their thinking about the relationship between reason and imagination. Those who know the works of our late departed colleague Henry Corbin, know how important is the question of the relationship between imagination and reason. The Encyclopaedists thought of themselves as the disciples of the great English philosopher Francis Bacon (d. 1626), who had contributed some ideas about the organization of the sciences for an encyclopaedia in English called *The Chambers Encyclopaedia*, which is still published today. It was Bacon's idea that there are three human faculties: memory, imagination and reason. His organization of the three was to start with memory, the idea being that the impressions that come to the mind from

outside – he and others were materialist in this sense – are separated first by memory, which leads to history. Then there is imagination which imitates, or as the Encyclopaedists used to say, counterfeits what comes from the senses, and that leads to poetry. Finally, there is reason which examines, compares and digests these impressions. But the French Encyclopaedists changed this arrangement: they started with memory, then went to reason and finished with imagination. Their explanation was that Francis Bacon was only talking historically, whereas they wanted to think of knowledge in its real metaphysical sense, and for them the level of reason is above that of imagination. Imagination only imitates and counterfeits, it does not think or distinguish, it does not relate, and therefore it cannot be the basis of true knowledge or true science. They knew, of course, about something called faith – the Catholic Church had made sure that they knew it existed – but it does not occur in the arrangement of their *Encyclopaedia*.

Having in a way, or to some extent, briefly clarified the kind of problems that we have to think about in relation to rationalism, we must begin by asking ourselves how the rational tradition arose in Islam in the first place. How was it precipitated, so to speak? We have heard a lot about this question, about the rise of rationalism in Islam and its relation to prophecy, the sacred book, revelation and similar matters; but the central question which seems to have started the debate was – and I do not think I exaggerate – the claim to rule. Who has the claim to rule the Muslim religious community after the departure of the Prophet Muhammad? One should never forget that the origin of Islamic religious thought, or *kalam*, is this very question of who has the right to rule? Is it by the Prophet's designation of an imam or is it by election? If it is a process of designation, there is no choice because the ruler is designated, just as in the case of the Prophet there is no choice because God Himself chooses the Prophet. But if the leader is to be elected, as the majority of the Muslim community, unlike the Shi'is, thought should be the case, then what are his qualifications? Can just anyone be picked out and made the ruler? And that begins the whole process of rationalism in Islam.

Obviously this leads to wider questions about God's justice, man's duties to his community, and so on. But while this internal

debate was taking place, there came from outside through move-
ments of various kinds, directly and indirectly, by way of
translations and personal contacts, a millennial tradition of theo-
logical, religious and rational thought that was already there. One
should never forget or underestimate the importance of this tra-
dition. It was already there among the Greeks, the Indians, the
Persians and the Syriac-speaking Christians. Christian theology,
which already had a thousand years of history, dealt more or less
with some of the questions that were of concern to the Muslims.
The Christians were right there, living among the Muslims and
speaking their language. So one cannot simply say that this tradi-
tion did not exist or that it was not important. The difficulty in
trying to understand this process is always the fact that as it comes
in, it is in a much more developed stage than the indigenous one.
In short, while the Muslims were just beginning to think about
the problems of God's justice, divine attributes and so on, the
Christians had been thinking about them for almost a millennium.
The relationship at the beginning was unequal and it took some
time before Muslims could master these questions for themselves
and become able to do just as well, if not better, than the tradi-
tion that they received. In these matters, especially concerning
rational thought, one should always remember that in the forma-
tion of a tradition, people do not reinvent the wheel every time;
they have to start from the stage where things have developed
already and try to push them a stage further.

Within the tradition that came in, there was a central impor-
tant strand called Neoplatonism, which was significant for all the
revealed religions. Neoplatonism was the intellectual baggage, so
to speak, that came through Greek, Syriac, Christian and Jewish
thought, and tried to make room for a God beyond reason. The
idea of God is not just something that is hard to understand, or
which would take time for one to know. God is simply above and
beyond reason; He cannot be touched by reason which is a stage
below, the product of that higher being called God. This could
be expressed mythologically in many different ways. The founder
of the Neoplatonic school, Plotinus, lived in the 3rd century, but
we are speaking now of Muslims in the 7th and 8th centuries. So
five centuries of philosophic thought were in part dominated by
this school, which somehow the revealed religions, especially

Christianity, found very attractive. They found it easy to under-
stand and to build their intellectual baggage, so to speak, around
this idea, because in the Bible and the Qur'an one reads many
things about the divinity that cannot be simply understood ra-
tionally, or which would take long, convoluted, rational arguments
to make sense of. It was much simpler to say that all this belonged
to that centre of the divinity that was not approachable through
reason. In addition, Neoplatonism provided the revealed religions
with support for the idea that the divinity is active. That is the
important thing about the divinity; it is not just a mind, it is some-
thing that does things. In Greek it is called *ergon*, deed, rather
than *logos*, speech. The divinity is not only above reason, it is also
something that acts and causes things to be.

   The first impact among Muslim theologians was therefore of
Neoplatonism. In Islamic thought, the recovery of Plato and Aris-
totle came much later. It took a century or two to translate their
works and try to understand them. Also, and this is part of what
precipitated things, the secular powers, especially the Abbasid
caliphate in Baghdad, now had mundane needs. As a vast empire,
it needed communications, bridges and hospitals, which depend
on mathematical and medical knowledge. These mundane sci-
ences had to be encouraged, developed and supported. We must
remember that in Greek and medieval philosophies, these sciences
had never been separate in our modern sense. No one would learn
just biology and nothing else; it was necessary to study philosophy
as part of a medical education, mathematical studies or physics.
Ultimately, the entire early Near Eastern tradition of thought, in-
cluding philosophy and science, became incorporated, absorbed
and thought about in the Muslim community along with the prob-
lems it generated.

   How did the community, or the various parts of the commu-
nity react to this tradition? Initially, as far as anyone knows, there
was a single global theological school, the Mu'tazila. Within that
were all kinds of factions and wings consisting of mystics, atomists,
pure rationalists, historians, traditionalists, and so on. But it seems
that by the 10th century, it was impossible to incorporate the en-
tire Greek–Christian tradition under one umbrella and, therefore,
there seems to have been a break up. It was a scenario in which
too many things were moving and struggling with one another,

and not really getting along any more. The most famous illustration of this is the thinker and theologian Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935–6), who decided to break with the general school of the Mu'tazila and founded what then became the standard Sunni theological school. But other than that, and more interesting for us perhaps, is that at the other extreme some more or less pure rationalists, who were in many ways like the European Encyclopaedists, also broke away. The famous figure here is that of Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Razi (d. 925 or 935), the physician who, among other things, had a famous debate with an Ismaili philosopher, Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 934). The former al-Razi claimed to know more than Galen, the greatest physician of the past. Like the Encyclopaedists, he opposed all forms of human authority in matters of knowledge, even that of the Prophet. Abu Bakr al-Razi thought that all reasonable men are equally able to look after themselves and their own affairs, since they are equally inspired. He believed in something one could call global inspiration, that every person has the potential of being inspired, and he therefore opposed any special kind of inspiration. According to Abu Bakr al-Razi, the Prophet had no business to claim a special connection with the divinity. We all have a connection with divine reason in our own way, depending on how good we are in our knowledge, in our studies and so on. So everyone is able to know the truth, to know what earlier men taught, and equally able to improve on it, exactly as the Encyclopaedists thought. Like them, al-Razi believed in progress, but his notion of progress was not our notion of progress, which is in the moral sense. We think that society somehow develops and becomes better morally; but previously the notion of progress was limited to what one might call the sciences and the arts, to advancements in human knowledge.

Unfortunately, the only real documentation we have of the debate between the two Razis is from the side of Abu Bakr al-Razi's Ismaili opponents who defended the need for prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and yet in his heart that is what Abu Bakr al-Razi really thought. He was opposed altogether to prophecy, to particular revelations and to the divine laws, and he engaged in serious criticism of religion in general. He thought that organized religion was a device employed by evil men to establish a kind of tyranny over mankind, and that it led to conflicts and wars. This is exactly

what the Encyclopaedists thought of religion, that it was of evil origin and meant to oppress human beings, to create fear among them, to exploit their innocence and credulity, to perpetuate their ignorance, and to prevent them from learning and understanding. Abu Bakr al-Razi even speculated about the demonic origins of prophecy. There is a long tradition of this idea among the Greeks, among some Muslims if they can be called thus, and in the Orientalist studies of Islam.

As for the school of al-Ash'ari, which I have mentioned already, it developed a certain atomistic structure to defend God's power. The atomistic world does not have its inner structure but it emphasizes God's activity at every point. The Ismaili philosophy that developed in the 10th century modified the whole philosophy of Plotinus, Neoplatonism, in directions that would then make sense of some of the basic religious doctrines that had existed before. The mystics went in the direction of both, serving the ennobled God and getting to know Him personally, whatever that means, through religious activity, piety and prayer, rather than through reason or rational knowledge.

Out of this came what we normally think of as the main tradition of Islamic rationalism – 'Islamic' not in the sense of Abu Bakr al-Razi or the Encyclopaedists but in a more strict and particular sense, in the tradition of people like al-Farabi and Avicenna (Ibn Sina). This tradition is obviously not the same as the theological or mystical traditions, but it has an understanding of non-rational phenomena which does not exist among people like Abu Bakr al-Razi or the Encyclopaedists. In short, we have somehow to think of the rational tradition in two terms: one that may be called extreme rationalism in which anything that is religious is denied as non-existent or is explained as being simply there to rule and corrupt society, and the other rationalism which more or less dedicates itself to trying to make sense – perhaps not rational in the narrow sense – of the non-rational phenomena of prophecy, revelation, the divine law and the problems that cannot easily be subjected to the laws of pure reason.

Of course Islamic philosophy was more than that: it was very closely connected with the sciences. None of the traditions just mentioned, such as Neoplatonism, Ismaili philosophy or any strand of *kalam* or theology, had much to do directly with the

scientists, with mathematics, physics or other similar sciences. But the main trend of Islamic philosophy – traced through Avicenna (d. 1037) who was a great physician, al-Farabi (d. 950) who was a great mathematician and musician, Averroes (d. 1198) who was a great physician, and so on – was very close in a very practical sense to the sciences. The other side of this tradition was the attempt to somehow make intelligible, in a wider rational sense, phenomena that were admittedly beyond reason, that were not rational and could never be turned into something altogether rational.

The whole notion of extreme rationalism is to get rid of religion and have a society that is based purely on reason. But the main tradition of Islamic philosophy never thought that a society can be based purely on reason, or that something like prophecy or the divine law can be explained purely on the basis of reason. One can make rational justifications here and there, like the 'purpose of going to Mecca is because we need to travel and see the world', but that is not really the Islamic notion of going to Mecca; or that 'we pray because we need daily exercise', but God did not decree prayer so that people could exercise their bodies. That is not what is meant by justification; one would need to have a better understanding of the communal aspects of religion especially. In a way, I am pessimistic about the possibility of a purely rational organization of society. The only way society can be held together, the only way people can be encouraged to pursue virtues and avoid vices, which may not always be in their rational interests, is through something like a divine law, through a doctrine of reward and punishment in the hereafter. However, such a law may not be useful because it asks people to do things which are beyond immediate utility in this world.

So the dominant tradition of Islamic philosophy tried somehow to mitigate the possible conflicts between reason or rational knowledge and the givens of revelation. It is not necessary, say the philosophers, that there should be an unknowable God in order for us to have laws that are not completely rational or instrumental. The question of the nature of the divinity does not really always enter into the question of the law as they try to understand it. For instance, the man who started this tradition, al-Kindi (d. ca. 866), wrote about how one could miraculously bring a law and make contact with a divinity that would take an enormous number of

years, centuries or millennia, for humans to reach. In short, one way to understand the divine law and its needs is to say that everything in the law, everything that the Prophet does, is ultimately rational in the sense that, if we had all the time in the world, if we could spend millions of years at it, we would eventually come to know how and why it was done. But we do not have this kind of time, we have to live in the here and now, we have to be part of a community, we have to do our duties, to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. How are we to be in direct contact with the divine? There is a way of short-circuiting that search through prophecy. In short, for the time being, we have to take the word of the prophet because all those who have mystical contacts with the divine claim to have a way that is shorter, that is more effective than it would take us to know rationally. So there could be a doctrine of rationalism which says that it is not necessary for us to know everything that we need to know here and now.

Then there is the question of the political arrangement of the community. The rational tradition in Islam happened to be very political in the sense that it was really concerned not simply with doctrines as such, but with why there should be a religious community and the relations between a religious community and a non-religious one. This tradition was very strong among the Abbasids in Baghdad, in Persia, in Central Asia where Avicenna came from, in Andalusia and North Africa. It is not an accident that the Ismaili community tended to be centred in North Africa on the one hand, and in Central Asia on the other. The main issue in Andalusia was mysticism. There is the famous connection between Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) that Henry Corbin speaks about. Averroes met a man who said that his son seemed to receive divine inspirations and asked Averroes to talk some sense to him. Averroes was older and well known, and he told the father to bring the son to him. The young man was Ibn al-'Arabi. Averroes looked at him, was very impressed with the young man and said 'Yes?', 'Yes,' replied Ibn al-'Arabi. 'Yes?' asked Averroes again. 'No!' answered Ibn al-'Arabi. Averroes in many ways had just as much of a sense of something that is not quite rational, that is in the realm of the divinity, but the question was how to get there. Averroes thought the only way to get there was through increased rational knowledge. As one perfects it, one gets

to its limit and then has a vision of what is beyond it. But Ibn al-'Arabi thought that the way was through practice and the teachings of those who had never studied anything in books. In fact, during his travels Ibn al-'Arabi met an old woman who did not know how to read and write, and who then became one of his teachers.

These are the two conflicting traditions. Behind Averroes there was the whole rational tradition. The genuine rational tradition never says that there is nothing beyond reason, because in almost every case the doctrine is that something must have generated reason, something must have been at the beginning, and that could not be the kind of reason that we know. Technically, the philosophers would say that it, the primary cause, combines essence and existence but that is not what is important. It is the doctrine of the source, that there is a source of this expanded notion of reason, but that the source itself cannot be reason as we understand it. If one likes, one can still call it reason, but it is not structured; it is more like a steel ball that breaks up to produce what we know as reason.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

In the remarks I made in the first section, I tried to explain that in my view the rational tradition can be divided into two extremes. One – of which I tried to give a major example in 17th and 18th-century European history through the Encyclopaedists whose prime Islamic representative is the physician Abu Bakr al-Razi – is the kind of rationalism that limits itself to a certain kind of reason and denies the existence of, the need to understand or justify, anything that is beyond this kind of reasoning. This is, as I have said, quite irrational because it denies certain realms of existence or experience that are obviously there.

This irrationality becomes even more obvious in the European case through the reaction of such concepts as existentialism and certain strands within Catholic thought, but I am not interested in going into that here. What I personally think of as true rationalism is the kind that understands and accepts the fact of the existence of things that are not quite rational, and this is the kind of rationalism that I think was the core of the Islamic philosophic

tradition, especially through those whom I have spent a lot of my life studying – al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes. They begin, I think, with the notion of a religious community and they try to explain the advantages of a religious community over a non-religious community in terms of virtues and vices, of claims to rule, and so on. But they also see that there are certain tensions between reason or the attempt to understand things rationally, and the common view of the community. These tensions are partly an attempt by the leaders of the religious community to try to test the philosopher by asking questions such as: 'How can you explain the creation, or the world to come, or reward and punishment? How can you explain such matters as the creation of an individual soul and the survival of an individual?' The Islamic philosophic tradition, throughout its history, tried to tackle these questions, to speak about them intelligently and to make sense of them. Perhaps the person who did that most effectively and who, therefore, had a great deal of influence in later Islamic philosophy was Avicenna.

What I should like to try to do now – rather than give more details and explanations of these various attempts to meet the question of harmonization between philosophy in its broader, true rationalist sense and religion, revelation or divine reason – is to begin something that is quite central to understanding the background of modern Islamic thought, what called itself and what we should continue to call 'the new wisdom' (al-hikma al-jadida). For that we have to move from Andalusia and Baghdad to Isfahan of the 17th century. At the very time when rationalism was being developed in France, this new wisdom was emerging in Persia and from there it extended to Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

The new wisdom tried to integrate a number of strands from earlier Islamic thought: theology, mainly Mu'tazili theology, because now we are dealing with an Ithna'ashari or Twelver Shi'i community, and Mu'tazilism was traditionally associated with Shi'i theology from the 10th century onwards; philosophy, and by that was meant the entire tradition from al-Kindi through Avicenna, including some knowledge of the Andalusians but not much; and above all mysticism, personal experience and direct vision. Wisdom, true wisdom, now came to be understood as the completion

of philosophy or rational thought, to be attained through private illumination, which could be in dreams or visions. The philosophic and theologic strands of the Mu'tazila are well known; but the main point was to incorporate the mystical strand. The Ithna'ashari community, which was then dominant in Isfahan in Persia, had been traditionally against mysticism, and it was through Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274) that it had been somehow encouraged to originally move in that direction. By the 17th century, it was clear that mysticism had become part of the intellectual tradition of the Ithna'ashari community. This meant not only that the Shi'is did not want to have anything to do with al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who had attacked the Ismailis and the Twelver Shi'is in his writings, but also that Ibn al-'Arabi, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and Avicenna became the great authors to study.

The two great thinkers of that period, of the new wisdom, the originators and founders of this school, Mir Damad (d. 1630) and his student Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), began again to tackle the central religious questions, but on a new basis. The problem of creation was constantly in their minds: was it created in time or eternal? How was Ibn al-'Arabi's mystical, partly anti-philosophic, anti-theological thought to be combined with the Aristotelians like Avicenna or the Illuminationists like Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (d.1191)? This was a synthesis that they tried to develop. It was a tradition which, successful as it was, encountered a lot of difficulties with the *fuqaha*, the traditionalist Twelver Shi'is, who did not share their enthusiasm for these people and their ideas. In Safawid Persia, there was already this tension between the *fuqaha* on the one hand and the philosophers who were the purveyors of the new wisdom, a tension that can be observed throughout the modern-day Islamic Revolution in Iran.

But to my mind – again I am not expressing here the common notion but my own personal view – the new wisdom had a basic flaw, which was its fatal neglect of political and social problems. One may read all of Mir Damad and Mulla Sadra, but one will find hardly anything that deals with the Muslims as a community, with their political arrangements, with the relationship to their kings or with problems of reform. Obviously, like everybody else, they wanted to reform the community by making everybody a student of the new wisdom, by making everybody a kind of little

philosopher, but that was quite irrational. When I raised this question in Iran in the 1970s, I was told that there is a book by Mulla Sadra on ethics; I have not seen the book yet but it is all that might exist by him on the subject. For Mulla Sadra, ethics obviously meant individual ethics, not as a way of life practised in the community but as a way of personal salvation – an old story among the Neoplatonists, I am sorry to say, and even a tradition that was partly encouraged by Avicenna. Earlier on, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi had tried to reverse the trend in his *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, which has been translated into English (as *The Nasirean Ethics*, tr. G.M. Wickens, London, 1964). There is an attempt on his part to go back to al-Farabi, to think about the form of the state, the form of the community, and so on, but it was too little and too late. What happened in Islamic thought at this time is a kind of a replay of the development of Greek thought, which begins with a great deal of interest in the political and social thought of Plato and Aristotle, and ends up with Neoplatonism and hardly any interest in political, social or communal matters.

I am, therefore, quite happy to say that what has characterized the rational tradition from the beginning of the contemporary situation with thinkers such as Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), started with an attack against the new wisdom, to reform this kind of education which is a combination of philosophy, mysticism and *kalam*. The attack was aimed at this very point, perhaps the weakest point of the new wisdom, its lack of social and political norms, its emphasis on individual withdrawal rather than communal participation, on individualistic ethics rather than communal ethics, its inability as a tradition – a tradition that has gone on from the 17th century through to the present day, a tradition that is 200 or 300 years old and not a passing phenomenon – to speak intelligently about social, cultural and political problems at a time when Europe was experiencing a major intellectual and cultural transformation. By isolating itself from that development, and by so doing isolating in effect the only real, creative, active intellectual tradition in the whole of the Islamic community at that time, it isolated itself and therefore the whole Islamic community from developments in Europe, including the problems of domination by European powers.

It is, I think, useful to quote Iqbal's attack on the new wisdom.

There is some misunderstanding about Iqbal, who was a great poet and somebody of whom we should all be proud. Although he was a student of the new wisdom – his doctoral thesis dealt with the development of metaphysics in Persia – he was not really its disciple, despite the common view to the contrary. To quote from a letter he wrote in 1917:

> The present-day Muslim prefers to roam about aimlessly in the valley of Hellenistic/Persian mysticism, which teaches us to shut our eyes to the hard reality around us and to fix our gaze on what is described as 'illumination'.

This is not how we normally think about Iqbal when we read his poetry. He adds:

> To me this self-mystification, this nihilism that is seeking reality where it does not exist, is a physiological symptom giving me a clue to the decadence of the Muslim world.

This was Iqbal's reaction to the new wisdom, his reaction to that tradition from which, in a way, he must have emerged as a young man, which he must have studied like everybody else, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) whom he admired so much. When Iqbal speaks of the Persian encrustation of Islam, he has only one thing in mind, and that is the tradition of the new wisdom. The new tradition that Iqbal followed was initiated by one of the students of the new wisdom, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. With the recent publication of documents about Afghani, it is clear that he was not from Afghanistan; he was a Persian who had studied the new wisdom in Persia, and there are copies of the books that he studied and his annotations in the margins, which include Mulla Sadra and so forth. But his philosophic background is vague and no one has really clarified it. The general tendency from the evidence of these documents is to say that he was a student of Mulla Sadra, but I do not think that he was. I think he had tried very hard to go back beyond the tradition of the new wisdom, to Avicenna and al-Farabi, and to try to see the politico-social weakness of the new wisdom and somehow to make up for it by concentrating on the problem of the politico-social weakness of

the Muslim world in his time, including the problem of Western domination. In Afghani's debate with Ernest Renan (d. 1892), he tried to put forward a theory of the rise of religion and the importance of the religious community. But Renan was in many ways one of those extreme rationalists who thought that sooner or later all religions would be gone and there would be secular societies based purely on reason which would have nothing to do with the dogmatic, backward prejudices that seemed to rule the world. Of course Renan was irrational in thinking like that, since nowadays religion is coming back with a vengeance, and not of the kind that he would have liked.

In a way, Afghani was much more sensible in talking to Renan and in defending the case for religion. He believed that human society without God and prophetic knowledge could not be a stable society. It is in a state of constant war with people fighting each other and individuals living in fear about their lives and futures. Yet suddenly in this kind of a community certain individuals, certain geniuses rise up, who are not only inspired but they are also fully rational. They have actualized reason as well as the contact with their divinity; they bring to societies, through divine mercy and revelation, the kind of law and order which gives human beings a sense of security, a sense of community, a sense of comfort and well-being, and a sense of their futures, both individually and as a community. So he had a defence which was certainly not of the new wisdom; his thinking on the origins of religion was much closer to the older philosophic tradition of a man like al-Farabi than it is to, say, Mulla Sadra.

But beginning with Afghani in the 19th century there is a trend which comes through some of his disciples who were concentrated in the Arab world and the Ottoman Empire, because he lived in Egypt for a long time and was very much involved in the political problems of these regions. There was a famous shaikh, the Imam Muhammad 'Abduh, who became head of the new school in Egypt. He was a theologian and a jurist who had become a judge there, and under him two tendencies seem to have developed. One was represented by Rashid Rida, his student and biographer, who moved in the direction of what we now call conservatism, fundamentalism and Wahhabism. Even the Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) of today to some extent trace their origin to him.

On the other hand, there were students like Taha Hussein (1889–1971) and others whom we normally associate with secular thought in Egypt. One could ask questions about why this division took place, why the unity of the school did not continue, and so on. But this was exactly what happened. In short, their concern with political and social problems seemed to lead to religion as well as away from it, to people who would say: 'Well, if our problems are secular, social and political, we have to talk politics and stop talking religion.' On the other hand, Rashid Rida and others were saying that they were Muslims and wanted nothing to do with Europe. One often forgets that in 1936, Taha Hussein gave a series of famous lectures at the University of Alexandria entitled 'The Future of Culture in Egypt', in which he said that they were a part of Europe, that the 'nonsense' about being Eastern made no sense and that they must become like the Europeans. In short, this is much like what Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) was trying to do in Turkey.

Neither of these trends was intellectually very strong in the sense that these were not major philosophers and they present us with tendencies rather than philosophic positions which can be argued about at length. But if one is discussing the fate of the rational tradition in contemporary Islam, that is what actually happened in at least one of the major centres of Islam. We could ask what it is that drives people away from the Islamic community to extreme Europeanization, to becoming a part of Europe? Is it perhaps that the European cultural tradition is simply too powerful and will thus inevitably exercise its magic, so to speak, on Muslim intellectuals? Perhaps the figure who would exemplify this would again be Iqbal, because he could not be accused of not knowing the Islamic tradition. Iqbal had obviously studied its history and its philosophies. The question then is, what is his attitude to the present and to the future? Where is the Muslim community in relation to European culture? In a way Iqbal exemplifies this situation quite well, an issue I should like to take up.

If one reads, let us say his major work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1930), obviously one is impressed with the passion and force with which he tried to reconstruct religious thought, to build it somehow at a time of decline. But the question is, what was it being reconstructed on? What is the basis

on which he was trying to reconstruct it? My impression is that it was being reconstructed completely on the basis of modern European thought and modern European understanding of things, including religion. Iqbal certainly felt that the European thought of his time presented an infinite advance over traditional thought, over Greek and medieval thought in general, including religious thought. The notion was to reconstruct religious thought not only on the basis of one's own tradition, but also on fresh inspiration from modern thought and experience. We would all think that this is something quite reasonable, that one should get inspiration wherever one finds it.

The problem, I believe, is that Iqbal, especially during his stay in Europe, became enchanted with modern thought and experience to a degree far surpassing his allegiance to what he called 'free and independent enquiry'. As we read him, he quotes freely and with complete approval from authors like Alfred Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Henri L. Bergson and Albert Einstein. He considered Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) as some kind of a prophet and speaks of the 'mission' of Kant, which he calls 'almost apostolic'. But this means more or less following the Kantian view which separates science, especially natural mathematical science, from religion, and considers religion – as Iqbal seems to have considered it in his book – as a kind of a 'higher poetry'. So religion is reduced to a kind of imaginative poetry. We are reminded of the Encyclopaedists who held that imagination simply counterfeits things. Iqbal accepted the distinction between nature and history in the way that modern thought has accepted it. He looked back at the Islamic tradition in the light of modern thought and forced religion to recede to the realm of personal experience and mysticism. So there was a strand of the new wisdom which continued in Iqbal despite his fervent political interest in an Islamic community in India.

What happened in the case of Iqbal is something that has happened amongst us as modern Muslims over and over again. We become enchanted with the modern West through our education and studies in modern European culture, and we try to look at Islam through this perspective. A few things then follow. One is that we praise everything that Muslims have done if it has had anything to do with science, because then we are proud of

having contributed something to the modern world. In one place in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal talks with great delight of thinkers or trends which 'very nearly reach the modern'. He is delighted to see something of the kind. The modern West is very much given to the problem of history; history is very important to it. So what does Iqbal do? He looks at the Islamic tradition and *hadith* to find anything that has to do with history because that has now become a major problem for him too. Islam for him has to be understood as belonging to, and being relative to, a particular stage in history. Having taken on board this concept of history in modern thought, one eventually becomes some sort of a Hegelian in the sense that one begins to see the world as moving in stages, each stage having its own characteristics but being constantly bypassed by the next stage which is better and higher, and on and on.

If one looks at the world like this, the next question is where does Islam fit into this scheme of history? Islam gets pigeonholed; it becomes just one stage among many; it is a stage that has been bypassed by the Renaissance, by Albert Einstein (1879–1955), by the atom bomb and so on, which ultimately means that Islam is made redundant. We may continue to believe in Islam simply because we are Muslims or we like to be Muslims, and so on, but historically, universally, Islam is finished. According to this view, Islam was relative to a particular age, Muslim greatness was limited to the past, and that is it. One can continue to speak with pride of the Islamic origins of modern knowledge, but that does not get past the problem of Islam having been relative to a particular stage in history which has passed, which is over and which, in short, has very little to do with life today, unless somehow it has pre-given something that may look similar to what we call the 'modern'.

Think of the number of books and articles that Muslims have written to prove that Islam preceded the West in X, Y or Z, and ask why do they do it? Obviously they believe that what has happened in the West represents a higher stage and, therefore, anything that we have to contribute to that is good, and anything that we may have done that did not contribute to that was a waste of time because times have changed.

Iqbal went on to add that since he had to give Muslims

something to be proud of, and that there was a distinction be-
tween scientific advance and ethical advance, he ended up by
claiming that Europe today is the greatest hindrance in the way of
man's ethical advance. So again we have this kind of a notion,
very common in the Muslim world, that since Europe is at the
forefront of science and technology, whereas we are strong in eth-
ics, we should have a combination of both. If somehow we can
integrate Europe's science and technology with our ethics, then
obviously we would be the ideal society. In this way, Iqbal wanted
to create something which he called 'spiritual democracy'. I must
admit, with some hesitation, that I feel this is some kind of a delu-
sion, and I often worry about what has happened to Iqbal's
homeland after all this. My explanation is that Iqbal's lack of real
thinking about the political and social problems of the time and
his talk of religion as higher poetry perhaps meant that modern
Indo-Muslim thought did not have the basis, the strength or the
power that would enable it to create what it always desperately
wanted, a genuine Islamic constitution. An Islamic constitution is
not created by considering religion as higher poetry. Religion must
be understood as something different in order to create an Is-
lamic constitution.

The second and, I think, fatal error is the historical view of
Islam belonging to a particular period of history that has been
overcome and more or less bypassed by other stages, the notion
that we can always say: 'Well, it was great for its time, but what do
we do today?' This notion of Iqbal, which I am afraid is very com-
mon, is to be also found in an author who I always thought was
perhaps the greatest modern disciple of Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman
(1919–1988), who was my successor at the University of Chicago.
Fazlur Rahman wrote a book called *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago,
1982). I have the greatest respect for my late colleague, but one
thing that disturbed me was precisely this notion of trying to look
at Islamic law – something that concerned him very much – not
in terms of reform, because obviously Islamic law must be reformed
if we want to retain it, but in this Iqbalian sense of somehow ex-
plaining Islamic law through history, that it was something that
was fine at the time but today we have to change it. And to change
it in what terms? Is it to be in European terms, in modern terms,
in Protestant terms, in terms that mean the separation of church

and state, or this and that, as was partly attempted in Egypt by the secularists? Islamic law has always been subject to change. The fatal notion is to think of Islamic law, to say nothing of Islam as a whole, as simply a stage in historical development that is finished, as something medieval, something that was a great advance in its time but not in the 20th century. The question then is: what do we do as we approach the end of the 20th century? And I leave that question with you.